
Francis in Iraq. Shiite religious leader Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei: "The Pope is not only the leader of Catholic Christians, but a symbol of peace for the world"



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. Secretary-General of the Al-Khoei Institute in Najaf. He was born in December 1980 in Najaf into the family of the spiritual leader for Shia Muslims, the Grand Ayatollah Imam Sayyed Abul-Qasim , and is Co-Founder of the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue (ICID). The Al-Khoei Institute which he chairs forms part of the Hawza (religious seminary) of Najaf, established 1,000 years ago for Shia Muslim scholars who come here to study classical Islamic studies, with a focus on law. The centre combines a traditional Islamic seminary with a contemporary interfaith academy working together with local, regional and international partners on interfaith dialogue and peace projects. "Our main goal," said Dr. Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei, "is to form prospective scholars with a sound knowledge of the tenets of Shi'a Islam and an understanding of other schools of thought and religions. In this way, interfaith dialogue becomes part and parcel of their education." **What is the role of religious leaders in peace-building efforts? How can hate speech - unfortunately still present in religious sermons - be combated?** In many parts of the world, religious leaders are influential agents, and religion continues to play an important role in the daily lives of many people. Unfortunately, some extremist minority groups make an instrumental use of religion to justify their violence and hate, so it is the responsibility of religious leaders to counteract this trend and instil knowledge of the peaceful nature of religion through education. We must not allow people to hijack our faith and misuse it for their own nefarious personal and political agendas. **In your view, what is the role of the Christian communities in the Middle East?** If the Middle East were a palm tree, its branches would be Muslim and its roots would be Christian. Christians in this region are an integrating and indigenous part of our community. They greatly contributed to the development of our economic, cultural and intellectual life. *The beauty of this land resides in our diversity: we could not imagine this place*

without Christians. A well-known saying of Imam Ali, the first Shiite Imam, is a guiding principle: "There are two kinds of people: your brothers in faith and your brothers in humanity." The Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani repeatedly highlights the importance of human brotherhood in the belief that Christians have the same rights and responsibilities as Muslims in Iraq, united by citizenship. The religious establishment has never issued a fatwa inciting hatred against others, and it strictly prohibits the defamation of religious leaders of other faiths as well as attacks on their places of worship. **What do you expect from Pope Francis' visit to Iraq and his meeting with Ayatollah al-Sistani?** *We see the Pope not only as the leader of Catholic Christians, but also as a symbol of peace and moderation. For us, Pope Francis' visit to Iraq is not only a visit to the Christian community but to all those engaged in peace-building efforts.* The visit will send a powerful message on the importance of inter-religious dialogue. Iraqis from various social brackets, with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, are overjoyed by his upcoming visit and are proud that the Pope has chosen this country, the land of prophets and saints, for his first visit abroad during the pandemic. It will show everyone that there are no problems between religions or between religious leaders, regardless of our different backgrounds. The meeting will strengthen and encourage all organisations engaged in inter-faith dialogue and peace projects in Iraq and beyond. **Religious leaders will meet Pope Francis in Ur. What message do you wish to send to the world, to Iraq and to the entire Middle East?** Iraq has been sidelined over the years on account of security issues and the many wars it has suffered, but the Pope's visit will put Ur back on the world map and allow Iraq to resume its position in the region and at global level. *Interfaith dialogue is vital for all peaceful societies as it fosters mutual understanding regardless of differences, making us realise that we are all in the same boat, facing the same challenges.* The safety of Muslims is linked to the safety of Christians, and the safety of Christians is linked to the safety of Muslims. There can be no security for Muslims if there is no security for non-Muslims and vice versa. Non-Muslims are not only our equals in humanity, but, as human beings, they are our partners on Earth. In an increasingly globalised world, of distances and borders getting shorter, we all share the same planet, the same resources and face the same challenges. **Iraq has been afflicted by heinous violence and terrorism. Which path is conducive to peace in Iraq and in the entire Middle East?** We cannot allow a minority of violent individuals to alter the peaceful nature of human beings and of all God-given religions. *Scholars and religious leaders should step up their efforts to reaffirm the true nature of religion and prevent the misuse and manipulation of religious identity in the name of religion.* Religious warfare and hate have afflicted Europe for centuries, but Europe ultimately overcame those dark pages in its history and created peaceful societies. I am confident that peace will ultimately prevail also in this region, but it will take time and political determination on the part of local leaders and the international community alike: we are not cannon fodder for proxy wars. _____

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